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ABSTRACT

The concept of "motivation" is examined in this article in terms of anxiety levels and anxiety reduction. Three major factors bearing upon the degree to which students are motivated toward the study of foreign languages are personal interest, attitude, and ability. Dr. Smith urges more individualized instruction and personalized student evaluation in order to take into account the social and psychological needs of the student as an individual. He discusses how student attitudes can be assessed with Leon Jakobovits' "Foreign Language Questionnaire," available from the Modern Language Association's Materials Center. A broadening of the language curriculum is also recommended to improve student motivation. (RL)

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MOTIVATION

By Dr. Alfred N. Smith

I am highly motivated to make this presentation on motivation because my anxiety level is high, and I want to reduce it. I am on the spot. You have expectations you hope I will meet. The fastest way to reduce this anxiety is to get through this speech. This is a kind of motivation; the rat in the box variety that behaviorists are so fond of describing. As physical needs or anxieties become more accute, the subject is compelled to find ways of reducing them.

The rat deprived of food for several days, on the verge of starvation, finds his way through the maze to the food pellet. If only we could motivate our students as easily. People are not rats and depriving our students of a language for several days is not going to cause them to come pounding on our doors in search of relief. We have to look for other motivational stimuli.

What is motivation? The kind of motivation that teachers are interested in is called achievement motivation, the need to achieve, the desire to learn. This motivation (high, low, medium, neutral, or what have you) is determined by a number of different interacting factors: interests, attitudes, personality structure, and ability. This enumeration leads me to a statement that may seem strange to some of you: Motivation is not something that you do to a student; it is something the student already has. We cannot motivate students in the sense of performing some kind of direct action on them to make them want to learn. We can only motivate

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them by finding out how we can respond to the interests, attitudes, personality structures, and abilities that contribute to the individual student's level of motivation.

So you see I cannot give you the magic formula to motivate the class. I cannot describe the tricky song and dance routine that you go into when the class loses interest. You can only motivate individually.

Interests. It is an obvious truth that students will want to learn what is relevant and interesting to them and will resist learning that which appears useless and meaningless. No two students bring exactly the same interests to us. One of the ways we can motivate, then, is to personalize our instruction and provide opportunities for students to pursue individual interests.

Our students are interested in learning about how their counterparts live in the foreign culture they are studying. A relevant curriculum must include a large dosage of contemporary culture. Florence Steiner has written an excellent article on the use of culture as a motivating factor in the French classroom in the publication French Language Education: The Teaching of Culture in the Classroom.[1] First she suggests a list of cultural topics appropriate to each level of language learning. Then she enumerates specific activities which can be used to implement these topics.

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[1]Florence Steiner, "Culture: A Motivating Factor in the French Classroom," in French Language Education: The Teaching of Culture in the Classroom, eds., Charles Jay and Pat Castle, (Springfield, Ill.; Office of Public Instruction, NDEA Title IV, 1971).

There are several foreign language programs in the country which give intermediate and advanced students a chance to fashion their language learning experiences according to their specific interests and needs. At Marshall-University High School in Minneapolis mini-courses in journalism, correspondence, culture and civilization, and German theater workshop are being offered.

In the April 1971 issue of the Modern Language Journal Allen describes the individualized program developed by Gerald Logan in which student interest is the "raison-d'être" for certain studies. "Packets designed to meet special interests have been created at Live Oak High School in Morgan Hill, California, where advanced German students can take "courses" in secretarial skills (They type on German typewriters.), military German, airline stewardesses' German, and import-export business German."[2]

In the same article Allen tells the story of how one of his student teachers saved a potential drop-out by exploiting an interest. The student "had given up, nothing 'turned him on.' During an informal chat with the boy, the student teacher found he was enamoured of automotive mechanics. The student teacher gave him a copy of Popular Mechanics in French, and the boy was fascinated to find out how much he could understand. By the end of the marking period the boy was doing passing work."[3] The old question of how to keep students interested is simply answered by letting them study what they are interested in.

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[2]Edward D. Allen, "The Foreign Language Teacher as a Learner in the Seventies," The Modern Language Journal, 55:4 (1971) pp. 203-7.

[3]Ibid, pp. 206-7

Attitudes--Attitudes are learned. Liking a foreign language is learned. Disliking a foreign language is learned. No student is born liking or disliking it. Students can learn negative attitudes about language learning from teachers who complain that students do not know enough English grammar to get through a foreign language course or who only want to teach the "best students." They learn negative attitudes from parents. Jackobovits in his article on "Psychology of Second Language Learning" in the 1968 Britannica Review Of Foreign Language Education mentions a national poll in which "parents were reported to have said that they consider foreign language courses the weakest part of the school curriculum and should be the first to go if anything had to be cut."[4] The parent who has had an unfavorable experience with foreign language study is not likely to recommend it highly to his children. The uninformed counselor who channels students into courses solely on the basis of college entrance requirements fosters the attitude that if you do not need it for college you do not need it period. The student who grows up in a neighborhood where there are frictions between ethnic groups or in a family where prejudice against certain ethnic groups exists will develop negative attitudes about the language too.

It seems logical to assume that development of positive attitudes toward the culture and native speakers of the languages we teach, will carry over into a positive attitude toward the language

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[4]Leon Jackobovits, "Physiology and Psychology of Second Language Learning" in The Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education (Vol. 1), ed., Emma Birkmaier, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1968) p. 215.

itself and the learning of that language. In an article entitled "Suggestions for Developing More Positive Attitudes Toward Native Speakers of Spanish," Madeline Cooke describes the many attitude-developing activities that she incorporated into her daily lesson plans in an attempt to develop favorable attitudes. She offers suggestions on how to conduct meaningful discussions about similarities and differences between cultures, differences in values, stereotype ideas and their origins, and foreigners' impressions of the United States. She provides an impressive reading list to be used by the teacher to foster discussion and by the student for outside reading. She discusses how to use such activities as role playing, pen pals, and native guest speakers to develop cultural empathy and reduce ethnocentrism.[5]

Attitude decline at later levels of language learning can sometimes be attributed to what Lambert calls feelings of "anomie." Students who have acquired a level of competency enabling them to think or dream in the foreign language may find themselves experiencing feelings of fear and unrest. As they advance toward new cultural orientations they become less attached to the monolinguistic cultural group to which they have previously been uniquely oriented. In an attempt to regain the stable ground and security of the mother tongue and culture, there may be temporary periods when interest is low, and some mild hostility appears toward the foreign language.[6] A patient understanding attitude on the part

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[5]Madeline Cooke, "Suggestions for Developing More Positive Attitudes Toward Native Speakers of Spanish," in Perspectives For Teachers of Latin American Culture, ed., H. Ned Sulye, (Springfield, Ill.: Office of Public Instruction, NDEA Title III, 1970).

[6]Wallace E. Lambert, "Psychological Approaches to the Study of Language. II. On Second Language Learning and Bilingualism," The Modern Language Journal, 47:3 (1963), p. 114.

of the teacher is required in this case. Letting up on the pressures of using the foreign language can alleviate the problem. Encouraging the student to talk about his frustrations and fears is also helpful. The student needs moral support at this stage, not criticism.

Poor attitudes often stem from the fact that students do not feel as though teachers respond to their social and psychological needs. This is especially true of the low motivated student who is unhappy and afraid. He is a failure socially. In his effort to overcome this he often becomes a behavior problem in the classroom. His social needs are more basic than his need to know. He must have security and social acceptance before he can begin to worry about the task of learning. All students for that matter want to be thought of first and foremost as people--not language learners--people with feelings, ideas, and opinions to be accepted, respected and understood. The language teacher is often guilty of treating the individual students who walk through his doors as language robots to be programmed to spit out language patterns and memorized dialogue lines. The language learner must be given the opportunity to attach to his learnings personal significance.

The assessment of student attitudes is an essential prerequisite to understand a student's motivation. A "Foreign Language Attitude Questionnaire" developed by Leon Jackobovits is now available from the MLA Materials Center. The questionnaire is easy to administer and provides the teacher with the following information: 1) foreign language background; 2) factors which determine their choice of a particular foreign language; 3) what they expect to get out of foreign language study; 4) how they

view methods of instruction; 5) their main interests in foreign language study.[7] Intelligent use of this questionnaire could help teachers to design their courses to be more in keeping with the students' expectations.

Personality and language behavior are intimately related. To expect all language students to be aggressive speakers is expecting certain students to overhaul radically a personality structure that they have lived with most of their lives. Of course this unreasonable expectation can turn certain students off. A teacher who will let students be themselves has discovered another important key to motivation. Let the student use the foreign language in a way that is comfortable and in keeping with his personality make up.

Most students have open, adequate personalities which permit them to cope successfully with most situations. Others with closed structures have a lack of confidence in themselves. They feel threatened in new situations. The tensions and fears which develop in these students can make them "speechless" in our classes. Again putting these students at ease by providing them with learning activities that will reduce the pressures they feel is the answer.

Finally certain personality patterns will cause students to react negatively to our verbal instructions and commands. For example, students with high anxiety levels (up tight) do not respond to motivational instructions: "You should have no trouble

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[7] Leon A. Jackobovits, "Foreign Language Aptitude and Attitude," (Chapter 5), in Foreign Language Learning: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Issues (Rowley, Massachusetts: 1970), p. 146.

with this." "It is extremely important that you understand this." "This will count double on your grade, etc." People with lower anxiety levels can be spurred on by these same words. It is probably best to avoid such motivational instructions altogether on a group basis. Just describe precisely to students what they are to do and let it go at that. On an individual basis, however, use whatever verbal stimulation the individual responds favorably to.

Most personalities respond more positively to praise than to blame and sarcasm: "Why can't you learn this? It is so simple any idiot could do it. My other classes didn't have any trouble with it at all." If the student has not done wal, he knows it and deserves no comment. Just let him try again. The student who knows that the teacher is on his side and has every chance to do well will be motivated to do well.

This brings us to the last factor tied up with motivation, ability. Nothing fosters high motivation better than successful experiences. Students do not learn in the same way, at the same rate, or to the same extent. To provide success for every foreign language student means: 1) more individualized instruction; 2) evaluating individual progress in terms of individual aptitudes and motivations; 3) broadening the curriculum to provide for more than just literature study and the college bound. In short--everything I have said about motivation implies a diversity of courses which vary in sequence, scope, and content to respond more effectively to the diversity of the needs of our students.